

# Devotional literature in South Asia

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R. S. McGREGOR



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# Govardhan, the Eater hill

CHARLOTTE VAUDEVILLE

Already in the early Upaniṣads, such as the *Chāṇḍogya* and the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka*, dependent on pre-Upaniṣadic Vedic ritual, an extraordinary importance attaches to food, *anna*. In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (TU iii. 1, 2), when the sage Bhṛgu<sup>1</sup> approaches his father, the god Varuṇa, and asks about the nature of Brahman, Varuṇa defines Brahman as ‘Food, Breath, Sight, Hearing, Mind and Speech’ – in that order – and Bhṛgu himself finally understands that ‘Brahman is food’:

The man who knows this about the nature of food roams at will, eating what he will, changing form at will. TU iii. 9

He who knows that food depends [and is firmly based] on food has himself a firm basis: he becomes an owner of food, and eater of food, rich in offspring, cattle and the vital form of Brahman, rich in fame. TU iii. 9

I am food! I am food! I am food!

I am an eater of food! I am an eater of food! I am an eater of food! TU iii. 10

## The mountain and the hero

Mountains, associated with *Nāgas*, divine cobras, on the one hand, and with milchcows on the other, are among the most ancient objects of cult in India.<sup>2</sup> In the *Ṛg-Veda* (1. 544, 2), Viṣṇu is *girikṣīt*, ‘mountain-dwelling’; the Lord of waters is Varuṇa, of plants, Soma, and of cattle, Rudra.<sup>3</sup> In later literature, Rudra himself is the Lord of mountains, *giriśa*. As Mountain-Dweller and Lord of cattle, Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl also relates to Rudra, thus assuming a Śaivite background.

As a cowherd hero, Kṛṣṇa assumes the dark hue of the mountain deity Govardhan, as well as the activity of the pastoral castes. Under his human form, Kṛṣṇa controls the dangerous world of mountains and *Nāgas* on the one hand, and the life-giving food of the milchcows on the other. He is the Lord of cows and dispenser of the divine food, which is milk. His relation to milk is a unique one, making him the Food-Eater, as well as the Food-Giver *par excellence*.

In *Ancient Folk Cults*,<sup>4</sup> Vasudeva Agrawala gives several lists of archaic

folk deities whose cult is in the form of *maha* ('festival') celebrations, as found in early Jaina and Buddhist literature. In all the lists *girimaha* ('mountain festival') and the closely associated *nāgamaha* ('*Nāga* festival') figure prominently. The same author notes that *girimaha* (or *pārvata-yātrā*) was connected with pastoral life 'in which people subsisted mostly on cattle-breeding'.

The supreme importance of worshipping hills, forests, and cattle is expressed in a well-known passage of the *Harivaṁśa*, in which Kṛṣṇa, as hero and leader of the cowherd tribe, undertakes to wean away his companions from other folk festivals and to impress on them the extreme importance of worshipping Govardhan Hill:

We are milkmen and we live in forests and hills. Hills, forests and cattle, these are our supreme benefactors . . . From hills we derive the greatest of benefits. We should therefore start sacrifices in honour of the hills. Let cows and bulls decorated with autumnal flowers go round yonder hill.<sup>5</sup>

### **The *govardhanadharaṇa* episode**

Characteristic of the Govardhan myth is the interlocking of the cult of the divine mountain with the cult of the divine hero, Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl, leader of the cowherd tribe. The latter is first represented as *govardhanadhārī*, i.e. in the act of lifting Govardhan Hill itself on his raised left arm.

In the earliest representation of the famed *govardhanadharaṇa* episode, belonging to the Kuṣāṇa period,<sup>6</sup> the Lord of the sacred hill is represented in his human form: that of a young hero, possibly a *yakṣa*, standing within a mountain cave which looks like a subterranean cow-pen, surrounded by cows and cowherds. The hero's right arm rests on his right thigh, while his left arm is held aloft, effortlessly supporting the top of the rock cave, represented by five conical stones standing in a row. The hero's gesture is traditionally interpreted as a challenge to the rain-god, Indra, though the latter is not represented in the icon itself. The young hero's expression is benign and peaceful: the figure can be interpreted as an epiphany of the hill deity residing in the hill cave, together with his cows and cowherds.

As Lord of the hill and resident of the subterranean cave, the hill deity is the Eater of the food offerings supplied by his cowherd devotees. The deity's own form, however, remains somewhat uncertain, since it is said to be 'changing form at will'. In the *Vaiṣṇava purāṇas*, the deity of the rock cave is identified with Lord Kṛṣṇa, the deified leader of the cowherd tribe, and none else, in spite of his double appearance: sometimes cowherd, sometimes mountain, or even both at the same time:

Accordingly, the inhabitants of Vraja worshipped the mountain, presenting to it curds, milk and flesh . . . Upon the summit of Govardhan, Kṛṣṇa presented himself, saying: I am the Mountain' – and he partook of much food presented by the Gopas,

whilst in his own form as Kṛṣṇa he ascended the hill along with the cowherds and worshipped his other self. Having promised them many blessings, *the mountain person of Kṛṣṇa vanished* and, the ceremony being completed, the cowherds returned to their station.<sup>7</sup>

Kṛṣṇa is made to assume a dual personality: as leader of the Gopā tribe, and as Lord of the hill and Eater of food offerings. As Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl, in his human form, the hero does not consume the food: when he does so, it is in his 'mountain form'. Once the offerings are consumed, we are told that 'the mountain person of Kṛṣṇa vanishes' and the deity resumes his cowherd status. Although at the time of the festival Kṛṣṇa assumes the role of the 'Eater' (*bhogī*), his true nature does not change: as soon as the eating rite is accomplished, the phantasmagoria is over.

### *The Maharashtra tradition*

While the north Indian tradition as a whole assumes that Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl, in his mountain form, plays the part of the *bhogī* at the time of the *govardhana-pūjā* festival, the southern Maharashtra tradition proposes a different interpretation, according to which the role of the *bhogī* is attributed to Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl in the form of a bull.

The earliest evidence in this matter is to be found in the *Śrīkṛṣṇacaritra*, a work in simple Marathi prose written in 1280 by Mhāimbhaṭṭa, an adept of the heterodox Manbhau (*mahānubhāva*) sect. In Manbhau belief, Lord Cakradhara, the founder of the sect, is identified with 'Śrī Kṛṣṇa'. In *līlā* 14 of the *Śrīkṛṣṇacaritra*, Mahādaīsā, a female disciple of Cakradhara, asks the Master about the *govardhanadharāṇa* episode: The Gopās had offered *pūjā* to Govardhan on Cakradhara's order, yet the *pūjā* was found fruitless (*abhāva*). So Śrī Kṛṣṇa himself came out of the mountain *in the form of a bull* and ate the offerings.<sup>8</sup>

In the Maharashtra account, the crucial point is the denial that Kṛṣṇa, in his mountain form, could actually stand as the *bhogī* and consume the offerings: for this purpose, the divine hero should assume an animal form, here a bull. The Manbhau authors, however, are not very clear about the way the bull Kṛṣṇa eats the offerings. It should be presumed that he eats them straight from the Gopās' hands, as in the *govardhana-pūjā* ritual. As to the nature of the food offerings, the Maharashtra accounts give no precise information: the bull being a pure, vegetarian animal, we must infer that flesh offerings (*balī*) are excluded: a position which agrees with the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* account, but contradicts all the other sources, according to which flesh is an essential part of the *bhog* offering at the time of the *govardhana-pūjā*.



### The Harivaṁśa account

According to the *Harivaṁśa* account, in the middle of Govardhan Hill, a Nyagrodha tree (*Ficus indica*) is seen ‘as high as a yojana’: it is called ‘Bhaṇḍīra’ and said to resemble a black cloud in the sky. That Bhaṇḍīra tree is also compared to a high mountain, which suggests another divine form assumed by the Lord of the hill: no longer human or animal, but vegetal. The Bhaṇḍīra tree is the archetypal image of the World Tree, with its branches expanding to the heavens and its roots plunging below into the subterranean waters – which is the primary image of the World Axis. The resemblance of the gigantic Bhaṇḍīra tree to a black cloud also suggests an identification with the dark-hued hero Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl. But the Nyagrodha tree cannot eat the offerings (any more than the mountain itself) for want of a mouth or mouths: to consume the offerings, what is wanted is a wild, flesh-eating animal, residing within the hill itself.

### The anthill pattern

A close look at Govardhan Hill reveals that its southern part strongly suggests the shape of a snake, with its mouth at the Mānasī Gaṅgā pond in the north and its tail at the Puchrī village in the south. The word *puchrī* itself means ‘tail’.<sup>9</sup> This resemblance, reflected in the names given to such *loci*, accounts for the identification of the strangely shaped Govardhan hillock with an anthill, known as a place frequented by snakes. Such a resemblance must have been behind the sneering remark found in a late passage of the *Mahābhārata* about the insignificant height of the famed Govardhan Hill:

O Bhīṣma, what is remarkable in that one Kṛṣṇa having lifted the mount Govardhan, which is but like an anthill? *Mbh.* ii. 38

Günther Sontheimer remarks that the popular deity Khandobā (alias Murugaṇ), a wrestler god like Kṛṣṇa, itself has its origins in an anthill inhabited by snakes:

‘The cows of a certain Gomuni used to spend milk into the holes of an anthill . . . Gomuni changed the hill into the form of Mārtaṇḍa Bhairava’: again a case of a hill deity changing form and assuming a human shape. In the Maharashtra account, the merging *mūrti* is god Mallārī, ‘the Enemy of [the wrestler] Malla’.<sup>10</sup>

The latter story may be taken as a variant of the Manifestation of Śrī Nāthjī on top of Govardhan Hill on a Nāg Pañcamī day, as narrated at length in the *Śrī nāthjī prākṛtya vārtā* by the Vallabhite Harirāy. In the Vallabhite story, the emerging snake-hood on top of Govardhan is interpreted as the very arm of the Lord Śrī Nāthjī, the Dweller in the hill cave: here the arm is a substitute for the snake-hood of the Nāga deity, long worshipped by local Braj people with oblations of milk.<sup>11</sup>

Actually the *rapprochement* between the Nāga's hood and the hand of Kṛṣṇa is already found at a much earlier date, in the *Riṭṭhanemi-cariu* of the Jaina poet Svayambhū (ninth century AD), describing the *Kāliya-damana* episode of the Kṛṣṇa legend:

There were five fingers with five shining nails and the Hand of Kṛṣṇa *was appearing like a serpent-hood* decorated with jewels; with his hand, he [Kṛṣṇa] caught hold of the hoods of the serpent Kāliya: at that moment, it could not be made out which was the serpent and which was the hand of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>12</sup>

In India, termite mounds derive an important part of their sanctity from the fact that they are conceived as entrances to the nether world and as sources of fertility. The residing Nāga of the anthill is the Eater, the *bhogī*; the feeders are his human devotees, whose duty it is to bring the food offerings at the appointed time. Those offerings consist of milk *and* flesh (*balī*): the anthill Nāga is no vegetarian and he is ever thirsty for blood. John Irwing notes that, at some sites, 'there are unmistakable signs of animal sacrifice, so much blood having been poured into the ventilation shafts that the mound is now defunct.'<sup>13</sup>

### Sūrdās' testimony

Several poems in the *Sūr-sāgar* (SS)<sup>14</sup> throw an interesting light on the Ahīrs' way of celebrating the *Annakūṭ* or *govardhana-pūja* festival; and also on the unsolved mystery of the 'Eater hill':

1. In SS (811) 1429 ff., Sūrdās gives a fairly detailed account of the festival, as celebrated in his time.

2. In SS (819) 1437, Kṛṣṇa trelles the Gopās about his own dream: how he has seen a 'big man' (*baḍa puruṣa*) who ordered him to worship 'Giri Govardhan' and to offer *bhog* to him.

3. In SS (823) 1441, 'Śrī Giridhar Lāl', i.e. Kṛṣṇa himself, is said to be the *kuladevatā*, the ancestral deity of the Braj people: *pūjā* is due to the sacred hill 'which is the living Gopāl' (*giri govardhana pūjiyai, jīvana gopāla*).

4. In SS (825) 1443, it is said that Sūrdās' Lord (i.e. Kṛṣṇa-Gopāl) is himself the *bhogī* taking on the *svarūpa* (own form) of the hill. This view does coincide with the purāṇic tradition, which supports the theory of Kṛṣṇa's dual form:

Kṛṣṇa ascended the hill and partook of much food . . . Along with the cowherds, He worshipped His other self. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.<sup>15</sup>

This Form which was Himself, He Himself worshipped, together with the people of Braj. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, ślo. 36

That same Form [Govardhan], changing form at will, kills the mortals who haunt these woods. Let us honour in It the Power which protects us and our cows. *Ibid.*, ślo. 37.

Both the *Harivaṃśa* and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* mention flesh (*bali*) as part of the offerings. This is not mentioned in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a later, more Vaiṣṇavized text. Yet the line quoted above (ślo. 37) does imply that the Lord of Govardhan Hill is a dangerous personality – actually a potential killer – which of course fits the nature of a cobra or *Nāga*.

### The *Sūr-sāgar* accounts

In the *Sūr-sāgar*, we find two distinct accounts concerning the mode of celebration of the Annakūṭ festival. The first concerns the ceremony performed by orthodox (presumably Vallabhite) brāhmaṇs; the second account, much more developed, concerns the Braj people's traditional celebration of the Annakūṭ festival.

In the first account (SS (832) 1450), the local brāhmaṇs are in charge: they call the leader of the tribe, Nanda, to preside over the ceremony. They themselves perform the 'sacrifice' (*yajña*) and put the *tilak* on Govardhan's forehead – i.e. on the sacred effigy at Jatipura called *Mukhārvind*. So doing, Indra's sovereignty (his so-called *thākuraī*) is abolished. Then the brāhmaṇs fashion a heap of food grains into the shape of the traditional *annakūṭ*, which is a figuration of the holy hill itself, and they worship it. So far will the brāhmaṇs go and no further: they will not put a foot on the hill itself.

In contrast with the first account, the second (SS (836) 1454 ff.) allows us a deeper insight into the popular festival as performed by the Ahīrs themselves. In this account, the Gopās scramble all over the sacred hill, bringing the *bhog* in their *thālīs*: the deity itself seizes the *bhog* offered by the Gopās and even snatches it from their hands, 'spreading a thousand arms' (*sahasra bhujā pasāra*):

The Ahīrs in a crowd drench Govardhan with milk,  
Closing their eyes, they offer Him the *bhog*  
And the God spreads a thousand arms to snatch it.

The same formula, *sahasra bhujā pasāra*, is repeated again and again in the following *padas*: (837) 1455, 838 (1456) and (840) 1458, yielding a touch of magic to the whole episode.

### An interpretation

How are we to interpret those thousand arms weirdly stretching out from the Govardhan rock? We somehow believe that the phantasmagoria can only be understood by reference to the anthill pattern mentioned above. If the Lord of the hill is the resident *Nāga*, his multiple arms must refer to the multiple shafts built into the hill itself, i.e. the channels through which the anthill snakes move, and the shafts' openings can only be the mouths through which the devout Ahīrs manage to feed their Lord with their naked hands.

In Sūrdās' version, the multiplication of the arms of the deity is a mystery of love: the merciful Lord multiplies his arms in order to bestow the supreme joy of his contact on each and every one of his devotees. Moreover, by himself tasting the food offerings, the Lord makes them *jūṭhā*, thus turning each morsel into *prasād*, for his devotees' greatest benefit. That mystery of love is explained in the last song, in which the Lord of the hill blesses his faithful:

You have done my *pūjā* very well!

With great devotion you have fed Me!

Stretching a thousand arms, I ate under your very eyes.

Yet, from now on, you should only know me as 'Kunīvar-Kanhaiya' and none else. With that *pūjā*, I have done away with all your pride: now go home, all of you, people of Braj!

*Sūrdās*: Śyām, taking it with his own hands, distributes the *jūṭhā bhog* to all of them.  
SS (844) 1462

The Lord of the hill is the true *bhogī*, Eater of food – but, according to Sūrdās, he wants to conceal his identity from all but his loving bhaktas: *they* alone can grasp the mystery, fondly feeding Him with naked hands, as a mother does. For Sūrdās, at least, the popular Annakūṭ festival is a mystery of love, symbolized by the gift of an impure, yet divine, food. From that mystery, orthodox brāhmaṇs and Vallabhites are excluded. Happily transgressing orthodoxy, Sūrdās sides with the Ahīrs, humble devotees of the 'Eater hill'.

## NOTES

1. The sage Bhṛgu, son or descendant of god Varuṇa, is supposed to be the author of the *Rg-Veda*.
2. See Vasudeva Agrawala, *Ancient Indian Folk Cults*, Varanasi, 1970; introduction, pp. 7 ff. and 42–5: *girimaha*.
3. Cf. J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism*, Utrecht, 1954.
4. Op. cit.
5. C. Vaudeville, 'The Govardhan Myth in Northern India', *IJJ* 23 (1980).
6. Located in the Mathura Museum; dated c. 3rd cent. AD.
7. *The Vishnu Purana*, ed. H. H. Wilson, 3rd edn., Calcutta, 1961, p. 419.
8. See Vaudeville, art. cit., p. 7 n. 20.
9. Ibid., p. 7, §2.
10. See G. D. Sontheimer, 'Some Incidents in the History of God Khaṇḍobā', *Colloque International du CNRS*, no. 582, p. 112, repr.
11. Vaudeville, art. cit., §2, pp. 19–20.
12. H. C. Bhāyānī, in *Apabhraṃśa sāhitya mā̃ kṛṣṇa-kāvya*, quotes Svayambhū, *sandhya* 6, *kaḍavaka* 3, lines 5–6.

13. See John Irwing, 'The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound' in *HR* 1982, 339–60.
14. *Sūr-sāgar*, ed. Jagannāthdās 'Ratnākar', Munśī Ajmerī, and Nanddulāre Vājpeyī, 4th edn., Varanasi, 1972.
15. Ed. H. H. Wilson, p. 419.